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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Dementia

What is dementia?

Dementia refers to a group of symptoms that are caused by changes in brain function. Signs of dementia include changes in memory, personality, and behavior. Dementia makes it hard for a person to carry out normal daily activities.

A person with dementia may ask the same questions repeatedly and get lost in familiar places. He or she may be unable to follow directions; be disoriented about time, people, and places; and neglect personal safety, hygiene, and nutrition.

Older people with dementia were once called senile, and it was thought that becoming senile was just part of getting old. But dementia is not a normal part of aging. It is important to find out the cause of a person's dementia. Some causes of dementia can be treated and reversed. Others are due to irreversible changes in the brain and cannot be cured.

What causes dementia?

Dementia is caused by many conditions that affect the brain. Some causes of dementia can be reversed, and others cannot.

Treatable conditions that can cause dementia include a high fever, *dehydration*, vitamin deficiency and poor nutrition, bad reactions to medicines, problems with the thyroid gland, or a minor head injury. Medical conditions like these can be serious and should be treated by a doctor as soon as possible.

Conditions or diseases that cause irreversible dementia, especially in older people, include *Alzheimer's disease* (AD), *dementia with Lewy bodies*, and *multi-infarct dementia* (MID), also called *vascular dementia*.

- **Alzheimer's disease.** AD is the most common cause of dementia. In AD, nerve cells in the brain die. The causes of the brain damage of AD are not yet clear. Symptoms of AD begin slowly with memory problems and become steadily worse. Over time, the brain damage in AD leads to serious problems in thinking, judgment, and the ability to carry out daily activities.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies.** This type of dementia is the second most common cause of dementia in older adults. Lewy bodies are abnormal structures found in certain areas of the brain. It is not yet clear whether dementia with Lewy bodies is a separate illness or perhaps a variant of AD or *Parkinson's disease*.
- **Multi-infarct or vascular dementia.** In MID, small strokes occur, and blood clots in the blood vessels in the brain cause the death of brain tissue. Symptoms that begin suddenly may be a sign of this kind of dementia. High blood pressure is a cause of strokes and MID.

Other less common causes of dementia include Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease, Pick's disease, Binswanger's disease, and AIDS.

Sometimes depression in older people is mistaken for dementia.

How can you tell if someone suffers from dementia?

Doctors can diagnose dementia and its causes or probable causes through a complete medical history and through physical exams and tests.

A person's medical history includes use of prescription and over-the-counter medicines, diet, past medical problems, and general health. The doctor also may ask a family member for information about the person.

Tests of blood and urine may be done to look for problems. There are also tests of mental abilities (tests of memory, problem solving, counting, and language). Other kinds of tests used may include brain scans using *computerized tomography* (CT), *magnetic resonance imaging* (MRI), and *positron emission tomography* (PET).

Who is most likely to suffer from dementia?

The elderly, those with family histories of dementia, and those with stroke risk factors are at higher risk for dementia. More women than men have dementia because women in general live longer than men.

How do you treat dementia?

Even if the doctor diagnoses an irreversible form of dementia, much can be done to treat the individual and help the family cope. A person with dementia should be under a doctor's care. The doctor can treat the person's physical and behavioral problems and answer questions that the person or family may have.

For some people in the early and middle stages of AD, there are several drugs that may delay the worsening of some of the disease's symptoms. For people with MID, doctors believe it is very important to try to prevent further strokes by reducing risk factors. This means controlling high blood pressure, monitoring and treating high blood cholesterol and diabetes, and not smoking.

Other kinds of medicines are used to help control behavioral symptoms of dementia such as sleeplessness, agitation, wandering, anxiety, and depression. Treating these symptoms often makes individuals more comfortable and makes their care easier for caregivers. Drugs used include *antidepressants*, *antipsychotics*, and *anxiolytics*.

Nondrug treatments include assuring that the person with dementia has a healthy diet, exercise, social activities, regular medical care, and a safe environment. Caregivers can learn useful methods to help cope with problem behaviors.

Is there help for caregivers of people with dementia?

Yes. Caring for a person with dementia can be difficult. It can affect your family life, your job, your finances, and your physical and mental health.

Most often, spouses or other family members provide day-to-day care for people with AD and other types of dementia. People with dementia usually need more and more care as the disease worsens.

There are many resources for caregivers to get help and support. The Alzheimer's Association has chapters across the country that offer educational programs and support groups for caregivers and family members of people with AD. Other resources you may find helpful include the Caregiver Guide available from ADEAR and the Eldercare Locator service provided by the Administration on Aging (see below).

For more information...

For more information, call the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or contact the following organizations.

National Institute on Aging

Phone Number(s): (800) 222-2225

Internet Address: <http://www.nih.gov/nia>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Phone Number(s): (800) 352-9424

Internet Address: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov>

National Institute of Mental Health

Phone Number(s): (888) 826-9438 Anxiety or (800) 647-2642 Panic Disorder

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center

Phone Number(s): (800) 438-4380

Internet Address: <http://www.alzheimers.org>

The information in this FAQ was adapted primarily from publications of the National Institute on Aging and the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, National Institutes of Health.

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